

Address by Admiral Stansfield Turner
Director of Central Intelligence
World Affairs Council
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
Thursday, 31 May 1979

THE STATE OF INTELLIGENCE

There is so little that we do today that is not involved in world affairs in one way or another. As members and friends of this Council, I am sure you appreciate how important it is that we have good information upon which to conduct foreign policy. Therefore, I know you are interested in the state of our ability to gain information; the state of intelligence activities in this country today.

If there is one word that characterizes the state of intelligence more than any other, it is change. Intelligence activities are undergoing a period of important and fundamental change. Change which I believe is beneficial. This change is not coming about because we bureaucrats have thought up some new ideas; it is coming about as a necessary and inevitable response to three trends in events going on around us. The first of those is a changed perception by the United States of its role in world affairs. The second is an increasing sophistication in the techniques for gathering information. And the third is a greater interest and concern by the American public in the intelligence activities of our nation. Let me describe these three trends and the impact that they have on intelligence.

First, I believe the United States' perception of its role in the world is changing. We are in a state of transition in public attitudes toward foreign affairs, moving from an activist, interventionist outlook to one which recognizes more the restraints, the limits on our ability to influence events in other countries. This is by no means to say that we are becoming isolationist. Quite the contrary, I believe we are gradually emerging from our post-Vietnam aversion to almost any form of international intervention and entering an era where our view of the world is much more reasoned and balanced. Clearly, the United States must continue to play a major role in the world. Yet the circumstances today are such that we must gauge much more carefully what that role can be and what it should be.

For instance, look at the difficulty that we have today in simply deciding who we are for and who we are against in any international issue. Traditionally, we often were in favor of the country opposed by the Soviet Union. But today it is not that simple. Looking back to the last year or so, there have been at least two international conflicts pitting two communist nations against each other with the Soviets backing one of them. In neither case was the other country an ideal candidate for our support.

Moreover, it is not nearly so clear today that it is necessary for the United States to take sides in every international issue even if the Soviets are pressing for an advantage. The consequences of a nation succumbing to communist influence are not always as irreversible perhaps as we once thought. Indonesia, Egypt, Somalia, the Sudan, all came under substantial communist influence, and have returned to independence.

Even when we decide that some struggling nation deserves our support, there are problems in providing that support which simply did not exist a few years ago. One of these stems from the revolution in international communications. Today, any international action is almost instantly communicated around the globe, instantly analyzed; and instantly judged. That judgment--often approbation or criticism--influences events and inhibits the actions of even major powers like the United States and Soviet Union even though those countries doing the criticizing may be only second or third level powers.

In the past, most of the free nations of the world took their diplomatic cues in international events from the United States. Today in fora like the United Nations, every small nation uses its one vote independently of what the major powers desire and, in fact, the major powers frequently find themselves together on the minority side of such votes.

If in frustration with diplomacy we decide to influence events abroad by military means, we must always remember the lessons of Vietnam. When the pendulum of offense and defense in military weaponry tends toward the defense, as I believe it does today, even a minor military power can cause a major military power considerable difficulty.

Now what all this adds up to is not that we are impotent on the international scene but that our leverage of influence, while still considerable, must be exercised much more subtly if it is to be effective. We must be more concerned with long term influences rather than just putting a finger in the dike. And, if we want to be able to anticipate rather than simply react to events, we must be able to recognize and interpret the underlying theme and forces which we can influence over time. For the intelligence world this means vastly expanding the scope of our endeavors.

Thirty years ago our primary concern was to keep track of Soviet military activity. Today, we recognize that the threat to our national well-being comes not alone from the Soviets, not alone from military events. We must be equally interested in politics and economics, in food resources and population growth, and energy reserves, international terrorism, and in narcotics to name just a few potential problem areas. There is hardly an academic discipline, hardly an area of the world which we can afford not to be well informed in if we are to keep policy makers informed. This is a more demanding time perhaps than ever before for intelligence and it is a time in which there must be a vast expansion of the subject matter with which intelligence must deal.

The second trend bringing change on us is the technological revolution in how we collect information. Basically, there are three ways to gain knowledge about other countries. One is by photographs--from satellites and airplanes. Another is by intercepting signals that pass through the air--communications signals, military signals--and you do that from ground stations, from ships and airplanes. And the third is by human intelligence collection--the traditional spy.

The first two--photographic and signals--are called technical intelligence and the third is human intelligence. Thanks to the great sophistication of American industry, our national capabilities in the technical area today are simply burgeoning. Interestingly though, rather than denigrating the role and the importance of the human intelligence agent, this has accented it. For example, the more information we receive from these technical systems, the more questions it prompts. A photograph or a signal intercept generally tell you something that happened in the past. The policy maker then wants to know why it happened and what is going to happen next. Understanding the concerns, the forces that bring about decisions, the intentions of other people and other nations, is the forte of the human intelligence agent.

Thus today, the challenge is not only to absorb and utilize the vast new quantities of technological information, but also to pull together all of our efforts in three of these fields--photographic, signals, and human--so that they can be orchestrated to compliment each other, letting us learn what our policy makers need to learn at minimum cost and minimum risk.

This may sound logical and simple. But because technical capabilities have expanded so and because intelligence in our country is a large bureaucracy spread over a number of different government agencies and departments, each with its own concern and its own priorities, we can no longer do business in traditional ways. It has taken some fundamental restructuring to accommodate these changes.

The Director of Central Intelligence has been authorized to coordinate all national intelligence agencies since 1947 when the National Security Act was passed. Unfortunately, until recently he never had the authority to actually do it. A year and a quarter ago, President Carter signed a new Executive Order which gives to the Director of Central Intelligence authority over the budgets of all of the national intelligence organizations and authority to direct the way in which they collect information. This strengthening of my authority is still new, and the processes are still evolving, but it is having a very substantial effect on the whole intelligence community.

The third trend driving change is the increased public attention to intelligence activities ever since the investigations of 1974 to 1976. Those investigations brought to American intelligence more public attention than has ever before been brought to bear on a major intelligence organization. The impact of this has been substantial and, within the intelligence community, it has been traumatic.

The right kind of visibility can be beneficial both to us and to the American public. By the right kind of visibility what I mean is visibility that gives the public access to information about the general way in which we go about our business and why we are doing it, and which confirms that the controls which are established over intelligence are being exercised as they were intended. To achieve this kind of right visibility, the intelligence community is trying to be more open. We are passing more of the information which we gain and produce to you through the unclassified publication of our studies. Taking the analyses that we produce, we remove from it that which must be kept secret either to protect sources or to preserve for policy makers some unique advantage, and if what remains continues to have adequate substance and we feel the American public would benefit from it, we publish it in unclassified form.

In addition, we are answering questions more. We speak in public more as I am with you today. We participate more in academic symposia and conferences. I know that the intelligence community is doing an honorable and a vital job for our country and is doing it well. I personally want you to know as much about it as possible.

Still, some of the visibility is unwanted. Unwanted because it benefits neither Americans nor our friends and allies. Here, of course, I am talking primarily about the unauthorized disclosure of properly classified information. At the least, these disclosures have demoralized an intelligence service that has traditionally, and of necessity, operated largely in secrecy. Far more important is the destructive effect that such disclosures can have on our ability to do what we are mandated to do by the President and the Congress.

First, no foreign country or individual will entrust lives or sensitive information to us if they do not believe we can keep them secret. Secondly, it is impossible to carry out the quest for information in a society like that of the Soviet Union if what we do and how we do it becomes public information. In short, these improper revelations damage our country's long term ability to know what is going on in the many closed societies around us. Because we are such an open society, we often overlook the disadvantage to which we can be placed if we are not well informed about what goes on in closed societies. For instance, actions like those of the Soviet Union in 1972 in dramatically entering the international wheat market cost you and me a lot in our pocketbooks. Other surreptitious and unsuspected moves can cost us in many other ways.

On balance this increased visibility is a net plus. We do need the understanding and the support of the American public and we do need to avoid any possible abuses. Yet, at the same time, we must recognize that with visibility there are also minuses. There are inhibitions on the actions we can take and limits on the risks that we will take. The issue today before our country is how much assurance does the nation need against invasions of its privacy or against the possible taking of foreign policy actions that could be considered unethical? How do we

balance these desires for privacy and propriety with the resulting reduction in our intelligence and covert action capabilities?

Congress is expected to give expression to this question of balance by enacting legislation called charters for the intelligence community. These charters would set forth our authorities to undertake specific intelligence activities, the boundaries within which we must operate, and the oversight mechanisms for checking on those activities. It is my sincere hope the Congress will pass these charters during this session of the Congress. Written with care and with sensitivity to the kinds of problems I have been discussing with you, charters could help to resolve some of these fundamental difficulties. Overreaction, either by tying the intelligence community's hands or by giving it unrestricted freedom, would be a mistake. On one hand, emasculating our necessary intelligence capabilities. On the other hand, inviting abuses.

After all these comments though, let me assure you that in my view our intelligence arm is strong and capable. It is undergoing substantial change and that is never an easy or a placid process in a large bureaucracy. But, out of this present metamorphosis is emerging an intelligence community in which the legal rights of our citizens and the controls and the restrictions on intelligence activities will be balanced with the necessity of gaining information essential to foreign policy. This is not an easy transition. We are not there yet but, we are moving swiftly and surely in the right direction.

When we reach our goal, we will have constructed a new model of intelligence, a uniquely American model, tailored to the laws and the standards of our society. As we proceed towards this goal, in this period of transition which will probably last another two or three years, we will need your understanding and support. For that reason I am grateful that you have let me be with you today. Thank you very much.